



Social Work and Social Policy

PhD Researcher Subject Handbook
(2019/20)

PHD HANDBOOK

SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL AND POLICY SCIENCES

Introduction

This handbook is designed to provide PhD researchers with an outline of the structure of doctoral studies at the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences at the University of Ulster. The handbook describes the key processes and research environment of doctoral studies at the School, which complement the equivalent process and environment of the university's Doctoral College (outlined in the College's [Research Studies Handbook](#)).

It is divided into five sections: an exploration of the PhD's central component, the doctoral dissertation; a description of the research environment for your studies, which includes an account of the opportunities – both in the School and in the university's Doctoral College – to develop your capacity to conduct research and teach; a brief description of the procedures used by both School and Doctoral College to evaluate your progress towards completion of your doctoral studies; an overview of the procedures to secure ethical approval and research funding; and, finally, some important contacts for all matters, including logistical issues, that relate to your doctoral studies.

1. The Dissertation

There are lots of ways to spend time usefully as a PhD researcher – gain exposure to the classroom, participate on a research team, organize a one-day conference, learn a new skill at a Summer School, or a new language for fieldwork – but the dissertation, nonetheless, remains the most important part of your role as a PhD Researcher. If you are awarded a doctorate, it will be on the basis of an original contribution to knowledge, which is encapsulated in a lengthy piece of written research (the PhD dissertation). It is important, then, to remember that everything you do ought to be related, even tangentially, to developing the ideas that form the basis of your doctoral dissertation.

The dissertation's format can vary considerably: there is no single off-the-shelf model to frame research, but the dissertation – as opposed to, say, a lengthy [policy paper](#), or an [official report](#), or a [non-fiction novel](#) – has some important characteristics, which make mark it apart. First, you write the dissertation alone. Second, the dissertation must make an 'original contribution' to your academic field. Third, you must *defend* the dissertation to a set of examiners. Finally, if you defend your dissertation successfully, it will lead to the award of a higher degree. It's an onerous task, but a rewarding one.

2. The Research Environment

There is an old-fashioned way to write a dissertation, which situates the PhD 'student' deep in the bowels of a library archive, or set loose 'in the field', or aloft in the data-scape of numerical

analysis. This impoverished, but ennobled student emerges wild-eyed on occasion to make conversation with their supervisor, who manages to be both avuncular and intimidating. This immersion and these encounters lead organically – perhaps even magically – to the production of the thesis, which may or may not be written inside three years. If a dissertation is not written, no-one much cares (wide is the road, narrow is the gate, etc.) – but if it is written, and defended successfully, the student passes into the guild of scholars.

The modern researcher inhabits a different type of environment, which does not make a categorical distinction between student and scholar. We are all researchers, or scholars – in the formative stage, or the early-career, mid-career, or advanced-stage – of our career, but the point is that these stages are continuous, rather than discrete. We inhabit a common environment, which is defined by a common commitment, exercised inside a communal environment, to generate and test new ideas about important problems and puzzles in the social and policy sciences. At Ulster University, we are committed to building a vibrant environment that supports the production of first-rate doctoral research. This environment has a number of pillars:

The Supervisory Team

The supervisor is the central figure in the academic life of a PhD researcher. There are many viable types of relationship between PhD Supervisor and Researcher – supervisors each bring their own style or interpretation of the role – but each supervisor, irrespective of individual style, shares a common [responsibility](#) to provide detailed guidance to the PhD Researcher about the direction of the PhD's research. The School is committed to provide each PhD Researcher with a supervisory team that operates according to the following principles. First, the team of supervisors brings an in-depth knowledge of the researcher's subject area. Second, the team meets with the PhD Researcher on a regular basis, either individually or as a group, to review work, monitor progress, and discuss future plans. These meetings are recorded on PhD Manager, which provides an auditable paper-trail of supervision. Third, the Supervisor provides an appropriate level of support to the Researcher in the preparation of submissions to the series of evaluations, which begins with the Initial Assessment (the '100-Day Viva') and concludes with the Viva Voce examination (see below for details).

Who's Who? The Research Director, Postgraduate Tutor, and Administrative Support

The Research Director (Markus Ketola) and the Postgraduate Tutor (Shane Mac Giollaíbhú) manage the overall direction of the programme of doctoral activities at the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences. The School's strategic objective is to attract high-calibre PhD researchers, ensure that every researcher receives adequate support, monitor routinely the timely progression of researchers from enrolment to graduation, and implement a subject-specific training programme – in conjunction with the Doctoral College's sessions on professional skills – to equip researchers with a set of skills that maximizes opportunities on the job market. For more information about the Doctoral College's programme, please read the section on the [Researcher Development Programme](#).

The Research Director has overall strategic responsibility for the programme, while the Postgraduate Tutor takes care of the day-to-day running of the programme, including recruitment, admissions, assessment, training, teaching, and mentorship. If you have any general

questions about these subjects, the PGT is the first port of call. If you have any questions about the practical issues around your studies – including allocation of desk-space, apply for funding, make a claim for authorized expenditure, get a broken computer or printer fixed, order equipment, or any question about the PhD Researchers communal space (in Room 02D02) – please contact Carol Boyd in the School’s office.

The Seminar Series

The School convenes a seminar series every term on the PhD research process, which provides a space for researchers – at all stages of their career – to discuss subjects that relate directly to the PhD stage of research. The seminar series is designed primarily to provide an opportunity for PhD researchers to present their own work to colleagues, but the series also provides a forum for a more general discussion about different aspects of the PhD research process (for details of each seminar’s theme, see timetable). It is mandatory for all researchers in their first and second years of the PhD to participate in this seminar series¹; it is optional for researchers in their third year. The seminar series is an important forum, but it is an informal space: attendance and participation does not provide any formal credits that count towards completion of the Doctoral College’s [Researcher Development Programme](#).

The Doctoral College

The School provides each PhD Researcher with support from the Supervisor, Postgraduate Tutor and Research Director. Every PhD Researcher, in addition, is a member of the university’s Doctoral College. The Doctoral College oversees the monitoring of progress of all researchers, provides formal training to assist in the development of transferable and employability skills, and provides fora to help researchers interact with other PhD researchers. These fora include a social area on each campus, Annual Conferences, and a Doctoral Forum that are designed to encourage interdisciplinary conversations. For a detailed description of the Doctoral College’s services, please visit the College’s [page for current PhD Researchers](#).

The Doctoral College also has a [Researcher Development Programme](#), which provides PhD Researchers with access to a suite of workshops, specialist skills sessions, online courses, PhD researcher initiatives and personal development activities. The Programme is designed to provide PhD Researchers with the skills and experience to become competent professional researchers, but also to increase the likelihood of employability outside academia. The College expects all PhD researchers to complete, in consultation with their supervisor, a Training Needs Analysis at the beginning of their studies. The Training Needs Analysis feeds into the development of a Personal Development Plan which, in turn, outlines the most suitable activities for each PhD Researcher. The successful completion of the Personal Development Plan is mandatory and is to be completed in conjunction with the supervisor. These sessions can be booked directly via PhD Manager.

¹ There are of course circumstances in which researchers might not be able to participate in every seminar (competing professional commitments, periods of fieldwork, personal circumstances such as illness or bereavement, and so on); these circumstances, however, should be brought to the advance attention of the Supervisor, who will make a decision – in conjunction with the Research Director and Postgraduate Tutor – about whether these circumstances justify absence from the seminar series.

Teaching at the School

The doctoral training programme has a wide remit, which includes an emphasis on both the epistemological and theoretical rigour of the social scientist, and the methodological skill-set and stylistic craft of the professional researcher. If you wish to focus exclusively on research, this emphasis provides a strong platform to write an excellent dissertation and build a rewarding career as a professional researcher. If, however, you wish to become a university lecturer, it is important to learn how to teach undergraduate students, who form the building-blocks of a public university. If PhD researchers wish to gain experience in the classroom – teaching seminars to junior undergraduates, for instance – the School will try to find appropriate placements in courses that relate directly to the research interests of the PhD researcher. We cannot, however, guarantee that every PhD researcher will have the opportunity to teach: there are a limited number of openings every year, which vary considerably according in both frequency and focus. If you do have an interest in teaching at the School of Social and Policy Sciences, please discuss the matter with your supervisor who can provide advice about what to teach, and (just as importantly) when to teach it. When you have a clear idea about the focus and timing, apply to complete the [First Steps](#) teaching course at the Doctoral College, and write to the Postgraduate Tutor who will include you on the teaching register of PhD researchers at the School.

3. Assessment

There are a number of milestones in the journey from enrolment to graduation, which are described in detail on the Doctoral College's [website](#). These milestones include a number of assessments; but only three of these assessments include both a written submission and a formal presentation: the Initial Assessment (held, usually, in February for researchers who enrol the previous September); the Confirmation Assessment (held, usually, in June for researchers who enrol the previous September); the Final Assessment (held within thirty months of registration), and the Oral Assessment (held after the submission of the dissertation, which usually occurs within thirty-six months of registration). There is, in addition, a set of Annual Reports that researchers complete to provide annual updates of progress. The paperwork for all of these reports are submitted via PhD Manager.

The Initial and Confirmation Assessments

The purpose of the Initial and Confirmation Assessments is to let the School evaluate whether you have a viable research project – relevant, interesting, and doable – which will lead to the timely submission of a dissertation that makes an original contribution to your field. It's also an opportunity to refine your project's design before you commit any more time and effort to its production, so this occasion is, above all else, an opportunity to develop your own ideas.

The submission involves completion, via PhD Manager, of a research proposal and a short statement about the progress you've made in your studies since enrolment. The research report is the critical piece in the submission: it will form the basis of your presentation and assessment by the School's examiners. The Initial Assessment report has a strict maximum word-count of 1,200

words; the report for the Confirmation Viva must not exceed 2,000 words. The report ought to be completed in consultation with your supervisory team.

The format of the assessment is as follows. The Researcher will make a ten-minute presentation on the subject of their report, which will be assessed by a panel that includes a Chair (usually the postgraduate tutor), who ensures the integrity of the process, and two examiners from the School, who will make the decision about whether the Researcher has made adequate progress in their studies. The examiners will, usually, deliberate and deliver a result directly to the Researcher, who will have an opportunity to ask questions. The result of the assessment will be communicated formally via the PhD Manager.

The research report should contain three core components:

First, we want to see a concise research question, and (if appropriate) a set of sub-questions, to frame the project: what question(s), precisely, do you propose to address? In this section, please introduce these question(s) and provide a short review of the literature that will structure your approach to answering the project's question(s). The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that you're engaging a relevant academic literature.

Second, we'd like to see a justification of the project. In this section, please provide an account of the 'theoretical and 'empirical' contribution that your project makes to the (academic) literature and also the 'real-world'. In this section, we want you to think about how to convince your audience that your project is interesting – not just to an academic reader (who, nonetheless, might not be versed in the technical detail of your field, so you should use appropriate language), but also to a non-academic reader (who might be more interested in the importance of the project to the lives of ordinary people).

Third, we'd like to see an outline of how, precisely, you intend to conduct the research. What type of methodology will you use? What benefit does this methodology have over other methodologies? (If, for instance you're proposing a case study, or a comparative case study, it could be useful to provide a justification for this approach, rather than a large-n approach.) What type of data will you use? What are your sources? In this section, we'd like to see a demonstration that your project is not only relevant and interesting, but that it is doable.

These two assessments take place in the first year of your studies as a doctoral researcher – the Initial Assessment is, usually, scheduled in late January or early February; the Confirmation Viva takes place routinely in June. We expect that each research report will contain a concise summary of your project's proposal and, in addition, a short statement (perhaps 400 words) that describes the progress you've made on the development of this proposal over the first year of your studies.

The Final Assessment (within thirty months of first registration)

The final assessment is identical to the earlier assessments in a lot of ways – you will need to persuade your examiners that you have a viable project that will make an original contribution to knowledge in your field – but there are two important differences between this assessment and previous assessments. First, we expect that you will have made significant progress in the period between the Confirmation Assessment and the Final Assessment. The report, then, should reflect the increasing depth of your research; the report will move from the proposal format to discuss more concretely the project's findings. Second, the process will include an examiner who

has an appropriate level of expertise in your subject area. We would envisage, too, that the examiner in the Final Assessment will also act as ‘internal examiner’ in your Oral Examination. The overall objective of the evaluation, however, remains unchanged: the Final Assessment provides an opportunity for the School to evaluate whether you’ve made sufficient progress in your doctoral studies.

The Oral Examination

The oral examination, or *viva voce*, is the culmination of your studies as a PhD Researcher. The fundamental purpose of the oral examination is to evaluate whether your dissertation does, indeed, make an original contribution to knowledge in your field. The examination is chaired by a member of the School’s faculty, but the examination is conducted by two examiners – an ‘internal’ (from the School) and an ‘external’ examiner (an expert in your field, drawn from another university). We expect that every PhD Researcher will have an input into the decision about who to select as examiners in the oral examination – a strong reference from the external examiner can be an invaluable aid on the job market – but this final decision over who comprises the examination committee rests with the student’s supervisors and the School’s Research Director, who nominate the board of examiners to the Doctoral College for approval.

Ethical Approval

If your research project includes a plan to conduct research on human participants or personal data, you will need ethical approval from the university’s ethics committee to conduct this research. We expect every project to confirm to the highest ethical standards, which entails respect for the rights and dignity of individuals and groups, a commitment to identify and minimize potential harm to participants, a commitment to maximize benefits for individuals and society, a commitment to establish a transparent research process with clear lines of accountability, and the avoidance of any personal conflict of interest. For a useful guide on research ethics, please read the Economics and Social Research Council’s [framework for research ethics](#).

PhD Researchers will, as a rule, seek ethical approval for the project at the end of their first year of doctoral studies; all PhD researchers must secure ethical approval before the commencement of fieldwork, or the acquisition and examination of personal data. For details of the School and University protocols and procedures on ethical approval for doctoral research, please visit the section of the Ulster Portal entitled ‘My Studies’. When you’re ready to submit the application for ethical approval, please write to the chair of the School’s sub-filter for ethical approval (Dr Una Convery), who will schedule a meeting to be attended by the PhD Researcher, Chair of the Supervision Team, and the ethics review committee. If the project

Research Expenses

The School is strongly committed to providing strong support to its doctoral researchers; all VCRS and DFE award-holders will receive £900 per annum as part of their studentship towards research costs. In addition, contingent on funding and based on a convincing case being made, the School will match any funding that PhD researchers are able to secure from elsewhere. If, for

instance, you receive £500 towards research costs from the Santander fund, we would contribute a matching £500 from the School. The School will also apply the same principle to self-funding, so if PhD researchers self-fund a conference trip, the school will provide matching funding. This support will also be available to those members of staff who are pursuing a PhD; the school will match fund research-related costs up to a ceiling of £500. Contingent on funds being available, the School will support each student with a further one-off £250 per student during their PhD. Any request for further funding will require a justification of support approved by the first supervisor. This support will also be available to those members of staff who are pursuing a PhD.